COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN IN NEED OF SERVICES
(CHINS)
STATE HOUSE, BOSTON 02133



REP. BARBARA HILDT
HOUSE CHAIRMAN
ROOM 22 TEL. 722-2140

KATHLEEN ATKINSON
CO-DIRECTOR
TEL. 722-2140

SEN. SALVATORE R. ALBANO
SENATE CHAIRMAN
ROOM 423, TEL. 722-1578

MARION McCARTHY
CO-DIRECTOR
TEL. 722-2010

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# INTERIM REPORT
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 20, 1987

In October, 1986 2,162 Massachusetts children and youth had been adjudicated over the previous nine months as stubborn, runaway or truant under the authority of M.G.L. c. 119, s. 39E-J, the so-called CHINS law. However, this number, a 25% increase over 1984, is considered by the Commission to be only the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of actual numbers of children in the Commonwealth each year who are experiencing trouble at home, in school, or in the community.

The Commission agreed early in their discussion to focus inquiry primarily on the status of the systems and policies which deal specifically with CHINS adjudicated youth. However, the members also noted the numerous studies and reports which have found that youths who fail to attend school, run away from home, or fail to obey the rules of their parents or school officials are more often than not reacting to longstanding problems in their family, community, and school environments.

Therefore, rather than focusing solely on proper treatments for "problem kids" or on a re-enactment of the "treat or beat" debate of past years which led to the decriminalization of "status offenses" and the closing of reform schools, the Commission paid particular attention to the causes and effects of breakdowns in family relations, schools, social services, courts and communities and to the roles that the various institutions play in supporting and guiding children through adolescence.

Through discussion, the following premises developed as bases for the Commission's recommendations:

- The bulk of public effort should be directed toward preventing conditions in families, schools, and communities which may lead to children being truant, running away from home, or experiencing apparently irresolvable conflicts with parents or school officials. It is important to prevent these conditions in the first place or intervene quickly and effectively, and the Commisson subscribes to the theory that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

- Access to a free public education through grade twelve should be an entitlement for all people, including the one-in-five adults in Massachusetts over the age of sixteen who are out of school but lack a high school diploma or its equivalent. Without an adequate education, survival is tough and effective parenting becomes even more difficult.

- The best solutions to problems experienced by adolescents are ones which involve the youth's family, school, trusted adults, and peers.

- Different strategies work in different regions, communities and situations. The needs of children, families, and schools vary vastly. However, how well or poorly a child is taken care of, treated, or taught should not vary as a result of accident of birth.

- Children and youth are the shared responsibility of parents or guardians, and all agencies, institutions, or programs, state or local, with which they are involved. They should not be allowed to grow up on their own.

- The solution to providing services to children and families in need is not simply a matter of adding programs or resources. Government, schools, social services agencies, and courts need to examine some of the fundamental aspects of how services are delivered and assess whether or not they are meeting the modern needs of families, children, and the community.

The Commission has concluded that public commitment must go beyond simply treating or punishing the "symptoms" - children who leave home, don't attend school or get "in trouble" frequently with their parents or school officials. On both the state and local level, efforts must be redoubled to provide and coordinate support for communities, schools, and families who need help themselves in order to help prevent and resolve situations where children and youth end up running away from home and staying away from school. To this end, the Commission recommends that:

- Existing CHINS statutes should be revised in order to entitle availability of services for families in need of services as well as for children and to encourage participation in voluntary adjustment services in the school and community as an alternative to court adjudication. Services should be family oriented, community based, and backed up by legislative and judicial mandates for schools and social service agencies to provide coordinated and readily available services to the families and children who are experiencing difficulties which prevent them from thriving at home, in the community, and in school. Specifically, the Commission recommends revision of the CHINS law to focus on services to families in need as well as to children and a strengthening of the school's responsibility to promote regular school attendance by all children.

- Existing state and local social and educational services for families and children must be planned, organized, and

coordinated efficiently in order to guarantee ready availability of services, promote accountability, and prevent incidences of redundancy or gaps in service. Specifically, to this end, the Commission recommends that a permanent, broadbased statewide coordinating committee be established to guide and coordinate the development and implementation of state and local policy, assist in long-range planning, and promote agency accountability to families and children in need of services. The first responsibility of this committee should be to promote increased cooperation between social service agencies and schools on the local level.

- Statewide data on existing programs, services, and resources as well as on the unmet needs and adjustment problems of children and their families should be collected, analyzed, and made available in an easily understood format to lawmakers, agency officials, and the public. Specifically, data which currently is collected and made available in a sporadic fashion or not at all should be gathered, analyzed, and published so that public awareness can be raised and information made available to inform public decisions about actions to meet the needs of families and children. Data should be collected from advocacy groups, services providers, social service and law enforcement agencies, schools, courts, professional associations, business, industry, labor and representative samples of families and youth.

- Efforts must be made to develop and implement preventive measures which can be taken in schools and communities. Specifically, the Commission recommends that state and local officials should take steps to provide comprehensive health education and human services in all school systems, parenting education services for families, inservice education for teachers, counselors, social workers and other related professiona and universal access to dispute mediation services in schools and communities.

- The Commonwealth should take steps to support and encourage state and local leadership and attention to the unmet needs of families and children through enactment of legislation and development of fiscal resources and incentives which address the immediate needs of troubled youth and their families in the following ways:

- By providing resources for the development and provision of special services for troubled adolescents such as:

  - specialized foster care
  - staff secure diagnostic and treatment services for severely disturbed adolescents
  - additional emergency shelter beds
  - adequate aftercare and tracking services;

- By providing resources for programs which support the family and prevent its breakdown through:

  - parenting education
  - family mediation services
  - day care, after school and summer programs
  - adult literacy and job skill training programs
  - increased public assistance benefits and minimum wage; and

- By providing resources for prevention and early intervention programs such as:

  - school based comprehensive health education and counseling services
  - alternative education, drop-out prevention, and school improvement programs
  - school based mediation programs.